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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001016

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STATE FOR SCA/FO A/S BOUCHER AND SAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A,
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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT KARZAI REAFFIRMS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

REF: 06 KABUL 05452

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Neumann for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) During a March 13 meeting with a senior U.S. Delegation to the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership talks, President Karzai reaffirmed the strategic importance of the relationship. He asked that the U.S. do whatever it must to minimize collateral damage and civilian deaths in U.S. military operations. Karzai promoted his version of the Amnesty Bill, which he says is the first to recognize explicitly victims' rights. U.S. Delegation encouraged Karzai to strengthen the Afghan Government's strategic communications capability, to expand his travel to the provinces, and to acknowledge a decrease in anti-Afghan rhetoric from the Pakistan Government. They also emphasized the importance of improving Helmand Governor Wafa's wilting efforts at poppy eradication, which alone could tip the balance over last year's figures. END SUMMARY.

REAFFIRMING THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

2. (C) On March 13, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, Special Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan Meghan O'Sullivan, and Ambassador Neumann met with President Karzai on U.S. military operations, strategic communications, Presidential travel, Helmand poppy eradication, the amnesty bill, and Pakistan. Other senior members of the U.S. Strategic Partnership delegation at the meeting included USNATO Ambassador Victoria Nuland, Joint Staff Director for Strategic Plans and Policy LTG John Sattler, and Office of the Secretary of Defense Senior Advisor on Central Asia Mitchell Shivers.

3. (C) USD(P) Edelman said he was struck by both the breadth

and depth of issues encompassed by the Strategic Partnership.

He emphasized U.S. long-term commitment to Afghanistan, which was reinforced by President Bush's \$11.8 billion supplemental request. USD(P) Edelman observed, however, that executing the money will be a challenge, and that General Durbin had his work cut out for him.

MINIMIZING COLLATERAL DAMAGE

¶4. (C) President Karzai thanked the delegation, saying their visit presented a good media opportunity. Moving the Strategic Partnership forward was of high importance to Afghanistan. He urged the U.S. not to repeat recent incidents of collateral damage and civilian deaths, reportedly involving U.S. forces. He said the victims often visit him, not to accuse him, but to share their pain. Their message, though, is that they do not want international forces to leave. He asked that we all "try our best to make sure that this does not happen again."

¶5. (C) USD(P) Edelman reassured Karzai that the U.S. goal was to protect the population and to avoid these kinds of "tragedies." He said they are under investigation and that we may need to examine our tactics, techniques, and procedures. He observed that the Taliban attempt to create these situations by operations amidst civilians, and Karzai agreed.

IMPROVING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

¶6. (C) Ambassador Neumann said that the media does not blame

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the Taliban for causing such incidents and asked if the Palace engaged in media outreach to address this imbalance. Karzai said, "I have not been able to do that properly." He said he does not like the term "spring offensive," because it lends an air of military legitimacy and authority to what is effectively a loosely organized collection of brutal terrorist acts.

¶7. (C) USD(P) Edelman encouraged the Government to build on the early successes of the National Communication Coordination Center (NC3). Karzai said he did not know much about it and asked whether the NC3 is in fact working. Ambassador Neumann said that it is starting to work and it is better than anything in place before, but that it is not big enough to carry the whole load. Assistant Secretary Boucher said we are working to tie such efforts into NATO to support the Government's message.

FOCUS ON HELMAND

¶8. (C) Karzai said he is seeing signs of improvement in the north, but that we need to focus on Helmand. He said if our "friends" in Pakistan are friendlier, then "things will look good." Ambassador Neumann noted Helmand Governor Wafa's extended absence to prepare for the Jirga and said that the governor-led eradication campaign is working everywhere except in Helmand. The U.S.-led group cut 250 hectares of poppy in one day and the Afghan group has only cut 70 hectares in total. Without Afghan Government efforts, the figures for this year's poppy harvest will exceed those of last year, largely due to Helmand. Karzai told an aid to put him in touch with Governor Wafa. He said unless we eradicate poppy in Taliban lands farmers who support the government will think only they are accountable. Boucher agreed, saying we have to show the people that the Taliban cannot protect them.

KARZAI AND GOVERNORS SHOULD BE SEEN IN THE PROVINCES

¶9. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher encouraged Karzai to increase his travel throughout Afghanistan. Karzai responded that he is "frustrated" with how little he has been able to travel to the provinces. He said he was unable to obtain air lift support for his security vehicles for a recent trip to Helmand. Ambassador Neumann said he would look into it. Karzai said, "The more I'm in the provinces the better it will be for all of us."

¶10. (C) However, Karzai expressed his frustration with the number of Afghan officials spending time outside Afghanistan on donor-funded visits and requested that the Embassy "limit trips for local officials to the U.S., especially this summer when it is most important that they be seen doing their job in Afghanistan." He specifically referred to a U.S. International Visitor Program that was planning to send eight to ten governors to the U.S. in June. He said a police chief disappeared for 20 days and it turned out he was in London on a program. Ambassador Neumann replied that he would look at our programs. (NOTE: The Embassy has postponed the Governor's IV Program until after the summer. END NOTE.)

KARZAI PROMOTES HIS VERSION OF THE AMNESTY BILL

¶11. (C) Karzai asked what the U.S. thought about the new version of the Amnesty Bill. Assistant Secretary Boucher said, "You did what you said you would do." Karzai said the bill is the first time victims' rights are explicitly recognized and preserves the right of the Attorney General to summon criminals. He said he would have the bill translated and distributed more widely.

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COOPERATION WITH PAKISTAN: JIRGA AND BUGTI

¶12. (C) Karzai said the proposed Jirga was being "well received" and that there was "enthusiasm for results" in Pakistan. However, he said Afghanistan wants to hold the Jirga in a month, while Pakistan wants to wait. He lamented that Musharraf did not meet with the Afghan Jirga Commission delegation during their recent visit, but said "the fact that they visited is good enough for now."

¶13. (C) Boucher said he had noticed a "certain restraint" on the part of Karzai's public comments about Pakistan. Karzai said, "On our part, yes; their's, not so much," but then acknowledged that "Musharraf has been quiet." Karzai said the issue of Bugti's grandson (reftel) is a "historic chance for cooperation between the two countries," and offered a meeting "any time, any place, perhaps at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation meeting."

¶14. (C) U/S Edelman then requested a closed door meeting with President Karzai, also attended by A/S Boucher and Ambassador Neumann (septel).

¶15. (C) The U.S. Delegation cleared this cable.

NEUMANN